

Call for Papers: “Reuse and Creativity. Pre-Modern Aesthetic Practices”

International and interdisciplinary conference of the Collaborative Research Centre (CRC)
1391 Different Aesthetics, University of Tübingen, 26–28 June 2025

Organised by:

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The CRC 1391 *Different Aesthetics* examines aesthetic acts and artefacts of the pre-modern era in a double relation: with regard to the way in which they implement traditional knowledge of form and design (autological dimension), and at the same time with regard to their embeddedness in socio-cultural practices and contexts (heterological dimension). According to this approach, the analysed objects move as actors between the requirements of the inner logic of artistic processes and techniques on the one hand and pragmatic-historical discourse and functional logics on the other. This double orientation of aesthetic phenomena towards form and function has often been described and called for, but its implications and consequences have rarely been consistently analysed. Research into pre-modern aesthetics in particular has often been characterised – explicitly or implicitly – by ideas of autonomous aesthetics. The programme of *Different Aesthetics* aims at critically questioning such oppositions of autonomy and heteronomy of the aesthetic and instead examining the dynamic tensions and transformation processes between the autological dimension (related to questions of *ars* and artistic traditions) and the heterological dimension (related to contexts and functions) that constitute the aesthetic status of acts and artefacts. At the same time, the historical and research-historical backgrounds that have led to the establishment and continuation of these hierarchies up to the present day will be analysed.

The second annual conference within the second funding phase of the CRC, which will be dedicated to the topic of “Reuse and Creativity in the Arts of the Pre-Modern Era”, is aimed at this necessary re-examination of research history. The concept of ‘creativity’ in particular, has recently once again become a central topic of societal discourse – far beyond the field of literature and the arts. According to sociologist Andreas Reckwitz, our late modern society is characterised by an “imperative of permanent innovation”. It was “not the technical innovation of the inventor, but the aesthetic creation of the artist [...] that provided the social model for creativity”. At the same time as this universalisation of aesthetic creativity into a social and economic resource, the rapid progress of artificial intelligence is taking place. Electronic text generators such as ChatGPT challenge man’s exclusive claim to originality and creativity. Concepts and judgements familiar from the history of aesthetics and the arts also recur in the debates surrounding AI: For example, the EU Parliament defines artificial intelligence as “the ability of a machine to imitate human capabilities such as reasoning, learning, planning and creativity”. The expression that AI only imitates human creativity leads to the critical conclusion that AI is

not genuinely creative. This conclusion is based on the autonomous aesthetic premise that reuse and creativity are in principle mutually exclusive: Anyone who imitates something is not a ‘creator;’ only the unconditionally or non-redeemably new is considered genuinely creative. Behind this argument lies a new adaptation to AI of the old juxtaposition of creative genius and reusing imitator.

As the current discussions about the use of copyright-protected images, texts or melodies by AI systems show, the (imitated) ‘creativity’ of machines is actually based on the reuse of man-made artefacts. This makes the old topic of the ‘right use’ (*chrēsis*) of man-made artefacts and their (exclusive?) creativity virulent once again - not least in economic terms, when it comes to questions of compensation for the reuse of copyright-protected works by so-called generative AI. The prerequisite for copyright protection of artefacts is the ‘threshold of creation’, a creativity-related criterion that cannot be met by machines as long as they reuse artefacts made by creative humans and thus merely imitate human creativity. In this context, the return of concepts of exorbitant authorship (‘genius’, ‘creator’, *divino artista* etc.) and irreducible novelty is an obvious consequence of the debates on the aesthetic potential of AI in the struggle for an ‘art of the future’ (Hanno Rauterberg). Autological (creative) postulates and heterological (economic) interests appear to be intertwined. ‘Novation claims are never epistemologically neutral’ (Susanne Köbele), also and especially not in the case of promising AI. The controversial nature of the topic is also evident in other debates. Controversies about the legitimacy of ‘cultural appropriation’, for example, raise the question of the relationship between reuse and creativity from a completely different angle, but just as urgently, especially in the context of post-colonial discourses. From the perspective of power criticism, these problematise the conventional European treatment of artefacts from around the world and indicate that local notions of re-use and creativity give way to highly location-dependent practices that often go hand in hand with normative notions of right and wrong, valuable and worthless, and so on. This not only concerns issues of problematic ownership and provenance, but also the question of the adequate presentation of artefacts in museums and collections.

The developments outlined here prove that the tension between creativity and reuse has become a society-wide and highly political issue today; at the same time, they show that reuse and creativity are often mistakenly thought of as opposing concepts that are mutually exclusive – imitation *or* invention, tradition *or* novelty, retelling *or* fiction. However, the aesthetic potential of the tension between reuse and creativity is thereby concealed rather than critically recognised. What is not recognised, for example, is that creativity can be justified not only *against* but also *out of* imitation (in the sense of ‘creative imitation’ and reuse) or that cultural appropriation is a constant of cultural transfer in the pre-modern era and one of the most important innovation factors in the history of aesthetics. To draw attention to such blind spots in current discussions, we are also addressing the topic from a decidedly historical perspective at the SFB's annual conference. After all, the roots of this issue lie in practices, discourses, and concepts of aesthetic production from antiquity to the beginning of modernity. In the pre-modern arts, reuse

was common practice, in both a formal and material sense: buildings were re-modelled, re-designated, and re-purposed; the use of spolia has been a frequently observed phenomenon since antiquity; sculptures follow (sometimes authoritative) prototypes or made from old materials; stories are re-told – etc. Such practices are not centred around the reuse of material per se, but rather around the fact that reusable material remains recognisable as such and is adapted at the same time. It is not uncommonly the case that such adaptations are also connected with a semantic dimension of quotation, cross-reference, and allusion. Thus, reuse not only yields new artistic opportunities, but also new contentual, functional, and social connections.

Despite the ubiquity of reuse in the pre-modern arts, scholarship has struggled to adequately analyse, interpret, and appreciate this phenomenon, due to weighty impressions of valuations based on aesthetic autonomy and criteria of strong authorship. Polemics against ‘mere imitation’ and ‘unoriginal epigonism’ spread far into the 20th century, into almost all artistic and literary sciences. These difficulties can be explained by the historical generalisation, since the 18th century, of concepts of artistic creation based on an autonomous aesthetics (Autonomieästhetik) and related values such as innovation, modernity, rupture or genius (as opposed to the old and traditional, continuity and imitation). Creativity and reuse have often been – and still are – understood as aesthetic contradictions, while they provide a productive tension in the pre-modern arts. Recently academic research on pre-modern aesthetics in the fields of archaeology, art history, and music and literary studies has shown that artistic practices of re-use as well as diachronic co-authorship, (re-)invention, combinatorics, re-framing, re-textualisation, translation, and re-narration indeed can be characterised by creative strategies. These are not determined by unconditional newness.

With this conference, we would like to conceptually substantiate this decisive change of perspective in a fundamental way and make it the starting point for an interdisciplinary reflected systematisation of the creative potential of reuse: The ‘different aesthetics of the pre-modern era gains its creativity not *against*, but *by way of* reuse. We will focus on the highly pertinent, socially relevant tension between reuse and creativity and, for the first time, systematically ask how creativity occurs or manifests itself in concrete aesthetic reuses, how it forms figures of aesthetic reflection and how it repeatedly coagulates into concepts that in turn become the basis for persistent, but often also controversial practices and theories. Which practices of reuse can be outlined within the broad framework of (not only) European cultural history? Which of these practices are particularly ‘creativity-affine’ and which are not - for what (possibly axiological) reasons (e.g. extreme cases: theft, copying, plagiarism)? Where are the (also) creativity-related boundaries between phenomenologically similar reuses (e.g. paraphrase, retelling, translation)? What role does the respective context of justification of reuses play for (the judgement of) their creativity (e.g. intentionality vs. coincidence vs. misunderstandings vs. economic constraints)? In what way do economic, social, religious, political, etc. factors determine the technical-artistic intrinsic logic? How do economic, social, religious, political, etc. factors determine the technical-artistic logic of reuse? In which relations is creativity autological-heterologically resp.

aesthetically ‘accounted for’? What characterises figures of reflection of creative reuse? The praxeological model of the CRC 1391 can serve as a heuristic starting point for the conference’s outlined systematic research interest, which promises to answer the question of how traditional aesthetic stocks and practices of the arts (autological dimension) are reused and re-actualised differently in different historical, cultural and social contexts (heterological dimension).

On this basis, reuse is to be defined in more detail as a diverse and extraordinarily effective creative practice that appears to be integrated into a complex network of materials, artefacts, performances, social orders and policies in the respective concrete historical context. It is thus to be worked out that creativity cannot – as in the autonomous aesthetic tradition – be located solely in the autological dimension, but that its respective heterological referentiality is also of decisive importance, to be specified in each individual case. On this basis, the aim of the conference is to re-establish the interdependence of reuse and creativity and to outline and systematise it in its cultural-historical scope and diversity, also in relation to spatial and temporal transfer and transformation processes - and this also and especially with the inclusion of perspectives that extend into the present.

Proposals for **thematically relevant presentations** relating to the outlined conference can cover a wide range of aspects such as those outlined in the proposal.

Conference papers should not exceed **25 minutes** in length.

Organisational notes:

The conference will be held **26–28th June 2025** at the University of Tübingen (Alte Aula, Münzgasse 30, 72070 Tübingen). Expenses for travel and accommodation will be covered.

Shortly following the conference, the articles will be published with De Gruyter in a collective work as part of the book series “Andere Ästhetik – Koordinaten” (“Different Aesthetics – Coordinates”, <https://www.degruyter.com/serial/aako-b/html>). Articles are requested for submission **6 months after the conference**.

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